European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas at the press conference

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Check against delivery!

Thank you.

Today we have a grim anniversary. Three years ago, today, the war started in Ukraine. I guess we can all recall where we were at this exact moment when we heard about this.

There is no question who is the aggressor and who is the victim here. Russia started bombing Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022, and is continuing to do so. Nobody in Europe wants the war to continue and nobody in Europe wants the war less than Ukrainians. They want peace on their territory. This is very clear.

That is why we have to be really strong against the aggressor and achieve peace through strength. The European Union is standing behind Ukraine. We have promised to do so and are doing so.

Today we adopted important decisions: we adopted the 16th package of sanctions that includes several items, and we continue to work on the 17th package. We also discussed that ministers broadly supported the new initiative for military aid for Ukraine. Of course, the details and especially the numbers will be decided and discussed [at] the extraordinary European Summit on the 6th of March. We have to put Ukraine in a position of strength so that Ukraine is able to say no to a bad deal.

Then, second point, we discussed DR Congo. The situation is very grave, and it is on the brink of a regional conflict. Territorial integrity is non-negotiable in DR Congo as well as in Ukraine. The UN Charter applies everywhere. We support the Luanda-Nairobi peace process clearly, to achieve the results by diplomatic means, but we are also taking several steps. First, the EU defence consultations with Rwanda have been suspended. There is also a political decision to implement sanctions dependent on the situation on the ground. We have urged Rwanda to withdraw its troops, and the Memorandum of Understanding regarding critical raw materials will be under review.

Then, briefly, we discussed the situation in Georgia. The adoption of repressive legislation and excessive use of force against the protesters is an alarming deterioration in the region. All these protesters must be freed immediately. It is clear that the steps Georgia is taking are

not going in the direction of Europe. We expect certain values, certain steps to be taken by the candidate countries, like Georgia is, and it is clear [that] Georgia is definitely not taking the right steps.

Then, finally on Middle East, we discussed Syria, also Israel, and the Gaza situation, but also Lebanon.

On Syria. There is hope to build an inclusive country and we are closely working together with the regional actors to achieve this. This is why we also agreed to suspend energy, banking and transport sanctions. Today, lifting is immediate and open-ended, but can be reversed if Syria's new rulers backtrack their commitments. It is a step for step approach. In March we will also have a 9th Brussels Syria conference – on the 17th of March. So, we will have conference to further mobilise support for Syria.

Of course, another topic is that later today we will have the Israeli counterpart in the Association Council meeting. So, usually they association councils are only between the European Union and the country involved, but this time the Member States really insisted to be present as well. So, we will first have a political dialogue together with all the Member States, with the Israeli counterpart, and then we will have a more detailed discussions of our own cooperation between the European Union and Israel.

On the situation on the ground, we urge both sides to seize the opportunity to move into the second phase of ceasefire; this is a critical moment to break the cycle of violence. I expect the ministers will emphasise also Europe's commitment to Israeli security and stressed the right of return for every displaced Palestinian for whom Gaza is their home.

Thank you.

Q&A.

Q. High Representative, Friedrich Mertz, the likely next chancellor of Germany, the winner of yesterday's election, said in remarks last night that he thought the US administration did not care much about the fate of Europe, and he also questioned whether NATO would exist in its current form by the time of its summit in June. Was there any discussion about that point of view, about those remarks, today? What is your view on them?

Thank you. First, there was not a discussion about this, because it is not a NATO meeting and we had a very, very clear agenda. But it is clear that the statements coming from the United States make us all worried. What is the state of play of the transatlantic relationship? It is clear that we have had differences before, but we have always managed to sort them out and we also expect to do so this time. We are reaching out to the American new administration. I will also tomorrow travel to the United States to meet Marco Rubio and other representatives there to discuss the issues that are of interest to both of us. But I want to stress that NATO is a defence alliance that is there to be for the defence of all the members –

and it has worked well, also for America. Let me remind you that the only time Article 5 was called was for America. Countries like my own went to support America in their issues. And we lost a lot of soldiers there, I mean we lost 12 soldiers as Estonia, if you think how small country we are, I do not even know what is the percentage to compare. It is clear that we were with our allies. We hope that the transatlantic alliance works, because it has worked for both ways. So far, we do not have any indication that it would not. Of course it is going to change, that is very clear. But we should not throw something out the window that that has worked well so far.

Q. One question following today's talks with the Foreign Ministers, do you sense that next week, during the extraordinary Council, there will be concrete decisions regarding the long-term security for Ukraine? And, secondly, you just said that you will be reaching out tomorrow the US administration and you are meeting with US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, my question is, what are your principle aims for these talks? I mean, will you try to convince them that Europe needs to be at the negotiating table?

First, on the initiative. So, today, around the table I heard a broad support for the initiative. We did not have concrete numbers in the initiative so that the leaders would fill them in and I think, you know, today it was a broad support for the principles that we have to move forward and I saw a lot of willingness around the table to do so. So, yes, I expect, and I also said there that some said that we need to explore this, so we need to discuss in detail and take the time. The problem is that we do not have time and that is why I really pushed that on the 6th of March we are able to take decisions because it is important to send also the signal that we are able to do this. So, I am positive or optimistic, I would say, regarding this. On the meetings, I will travel tomorrow but the meetings will be on Wednesday and Thursday. With what are we going? Of course, [with] what is going on right now, the war in Ukraine, what is at stake really and what is the European position on different issues. I have been very clear that no deal without us, without Ukraine or without Europe will work in practice – and that is for the United States, which also needs to work with us. So, a bad deal for Ukraine is a bad deal for Europe, but it is also bad deal for America. I must say last week I was in South Africa and met a lot of leaders from different parts of the world and everybody is very concerned about the multilateral system and whether the international law that we have right now that protects sovereign states from aggression by other states is really in place. I think it is in the interests of everybody that we are not in the world where might makes right and that is why we have to be also behind Ukraine. It is not only about Ukraine, it is broader European security architecture, and actually broader global security that is at stake.

Q. So on the light of the recent statements that are coming out from the White House and the statements by European leaders that Ukraine is needed to be put in the strongest possible position for negotiations. My question is practical: what are the real security agreements the European Union can provide Ukraine with? And one more clarification, today is also the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea; can you confirm that the Statements of European officials regarding the tutorial integrity of Ukraine includes also Crimea?

Security arrangements. Of course, all the Member States, and not the only Member States, but also countries in the broader global sphere that have signed security agreements with Ukraine, have to answer: what are they in practice? If you think in practical terms, what they could be, then you come to the same items that are there for any security guarantee to work. The strongest security guarantee and actually also the cheapest one, is a NATO membership. If NATO membership is not on the table – although we agreed that Ukraine's path to NATO is irreversible, we agreed this. So, in the end, Ukraine must be also part of NATO. If it is not in the first stage, then all the countries who have provided security guarantees have to answer questions about troops on the ground, about ammunition supplies, to actually guarantee the security. We have to have those talks as well. By the way, I had a discussion with one American representative in Munich and he said that 'we need a strong NATO'. I said that 'if you want to strong NATO then take Ukraine in, because the strongest army that there is in Europe, is the Ukraine army'. Thank you.

Q. I would like to ask, the Lithuanian minister said today that there is a possibility to reach an agreement how to confiscate a Russian frozen assets this March. Do you believe that European Union could reach an agreement this March? If not, what are the main obstacles?

Thank you. We need to have everybody's support for this and so far, we do not have the support for this. March will start this Saturday, so I am not that optimistic that we will reach an agreement in March. At the same time, I must say, the work is ongoing. I must also say that during this Foreign Affairs Council there was one more country that used to be against moving on with this and came on board. This is what I have always said: eventually, especially in the situation where we are right now, we all come to the conclusion that our taxpayers should not be the ones who are paying for this. It should come from the country that destroys Ukraine, which is Russia.

Q. Two questions, one on Ukraine. What is the message of the meeting today? You had 27 foreign ministers of 27 countries. Vis-à-vis Ukraine today, what are you saying particularly to the Americans? Second question, I was under the impression that Iran was on the agenda of some sort. Did you discuss Iran? In any case, what is the attitude and policy of the EU vis-à-vis Iran now that the US has put maximum pressure on Iran?

Thank you. Regarding Ukraine, we are saying that we are behind Ukraine – and there is nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine and also nothing about Europe without Europe. These are also the messages that we are giving to our United States counterparts. To make the decisions we did today is also to the direction to make Ukraine as strong on the battlefield as possible so that they would be stronger behind the negotiation table. On Iran, we were supposed to have a discussion [today] , in a Ministers-only format, but because very important foreign ministers were missing we postponed this. We need to have the three also in the discussions. That is why I am not jumping ahead because the point was to have a Ministers-only discussion to get the understanding where we are so that we are able to come out with initiatives and concrete proposals. But yes, we postponed it to March.

Q. Question on Syria, you made some significant announcements regarding the banking sector, specifically to allow a transaction associated with the energy and transport sectors. I was interested in understanding if there are guarantees for European companies that want to operate in Syria. That they are not going to have issues with the banking sector because the financial sector in Syria remains on the US sanctions. So, is there a way of facilitating work for European companies that want to work in Syria following these exemptions that you have introduced and so that they do not run into issues with the US banking sector?

Well, banking sector is always very complicated. I mean, even in European countries, companies might run into difficulties with the banks. So, can we give a guarantee? No, we cannot, but we can from our side, with regard to the steps that we have done, introduce new exemptions on the prohibitions on the banking sector to allow banking and financial transactions, associated with the energy and transport sectors, as well as transactions needed for humanitarian and reconstruction activities to work. Also, banknotes, coins; so far they were restricted. So, the point is that you know, the reconstruction can start the people of Syria, also refugees, can go back and start to participate in the reconstruction of the country. Also, four Syrian banks were removed from the list of asset freeze transaction plan, removing Syrian Central bank, for example. So, to re-open the banking sector and also payment channels, because this is this was something that was always addressed that it really hinders the reconstruction. But can we give guarantees that everything goes smoothly then? So, then, unfortunately no, but we tried to do steps from our side.

Thank you.

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